IF ONE THING CAN BE RESOLVED WITH BIAOQING BAO, THEN DON'T USE WORDS!": THE GENEALOGY OF BIAOQING BAO IN THE CHINESE INTERNET CULTURE

by

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“IF ONE THING CAN BE RESOLVED WITH BIAOQING BAO, THEN DON'T USE WORDS!”: THE GENEALOGY OF BIAOQING BAO IN CHINESE INTERNET CULTURE

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As one of the trendiest Internet memes in China, Biaoqing Bao has experienced fast development, from the early emoticons used on QQ and Internet images inspired by the rage comics in the late 2000s to a brand new branch of online communication tool around 2015. Biaoqing Bao has its distinctive feature to combine images and texts together to convey users’ emotions and feelings. Various technologies like Biaoqing Bao generators also enable users to draw different sorts of materials, such as social hot issues, to make them into Biaoqing Bao. Biaoqing Bao thus offers a vantage point to look at today’s Chinese pop culture. In this thesis, I will investigate the origin of Biaoqing Bao which can be traced back to 2009 when a new type of images emerged online to vent netizens’ sentiment against the Internet censorship launched by the Chinese government. As the predecessor of Biaoqing Bao, these images served the subversive purpose against the authoritarian manipulation over the cyber space. Although the subversive spirit embodied in Biaoqing Bao seems to subside when Biaoqing Bao has been more and more used on major instant messaging platforms, the creativity in Biaoqing Bao still leaves relatively free space for netizens to fully represent their digital selves and celebrate such liberty of expression. I will also investigate the 2016 Facebook campaign launched by the Chinese mainlanders, to demonstrate that such a subversive symbol plays an important role in constructing a united national identity to participate in the international political dispute. Biaoqing Bao provides a channel to vent the netizens’ anger in a playful way, in contrast to the

moderate attitude of the government. In this sense, I argue that Biaoqing Bao, as one of the semiotic codes created and circulated on the Internet, is not only a visual entertainment in communication as a signifier of Chinese pop culture, but also a practice that represents a subversive symbol that strives against any forms of authoritative regulation and manipulation in the Chinese Internet culture.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, the new term "Biaoqing Bao 表情包" swept over the Sinosphere mediums and attracted attention from netizens both in Taiwan and mainland China. Biaoqing Bao is a new Chinese Internet meme, which dates back to the era of QQ emoticons around 2006 and developed into a brand new form of Internet meme in the 2010s. It consists of an image and a caption to deliver the user's ideas. The popularity of this term Biaoqing Bao across the Taiwan Strait started when the presidential election in Taiwan ended with the winning of the Democratic Progressive Party (DDP) and Tsai Ing-wen as President on January 18th. The shift in leadership predicted a sharp turn in political attitudes towards mainland China, which would negatively influence the warming of cross-strait ties. Just before the election, Zyuyu Chou, a Taiwanese pop star stirred up the mainlanders' dissatisfaction and anger by waving up Taiwan's flag in her picture. After posting her picture, she was forced by the pressures of public opinion to make an apology. The Zyuyu incident soon became the catalyst that intensified the cross-strait relationship during and after the election. The president-elect, Tsai Ing-wen from the DDP also claimed that the Zyuyu incident hurt the Taiwanese people's feelings.[1] This ultimately fueled the tension between the two sides. On January 20th, China's mainlander netizens with pro-China

[1] Chris Buckley and Austin Ramzy, "Singer's Apology for Waving Taiwan Flag Stirs Backlash of Its Own," *The New York Times*, last modified Jan. 16, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/world/asia/taiwan-china-singer-chou-tzu-yu.html?_r=0; "Three Presidential Candidates All Supporting Zyuyu Chou," *Initium Media*, last modified Jan. 16, 2016, https://theinitium.com/article/20160116-taiwan-Tzuyu-presidential-candidate/.

comments scaled the “Great Firewall,” which blocked Facebook from the mainland China. Biaoqing Bao messages immediately flooded into the Facebook pages of Tsai Ing-Wen, Apple Daily, and other Taiwanese news media. Just as figure 1. shows, pro-unity comments with Biaoqing Bao swept over the Facebook pages. This cyber campaign was not directly aimed at the DDP, nor was it targeting "anti-unification" discourse by Zyuyu Chou. Instead, the comments on Facebook were to achieve the same ultimate purpose: to “firmly oppose any independence [of Taiwan].” Surprisingly though, the comments and posts in this Facebook campaign with serious political meaning took on the hilarious and sportive forms of Biaoqing Bao.

Figure 1. The Comments with Biaoqing Bao to Fight Against “Independence of Taiwan”

Although the international debut of Biaoqing Bao in 2016 made it closely related to the politics of the cross-strait relationship at that time, Biaoqing Bao had already been a common communication tool across various Chinese social network platforms in 2010s, before it was introduced to the 2016 Facebook campaign. The term Biaoqing Bao can be translated as “the folder of facial expressions,” because it originally drew from the QQ emoticon gallery, which is a set of icons of different facial expressions. With the development of social media and

technology like photo editing software, however, Biaoqing Bao began to include more and more pop cultural elements and the concept has expanded to include "any image that adds a visual and emotive layer to text-dominant online conversations."[2]

There is no doubt in saying that people today are experiencing a time of increased visual interaction due to the introduction of various emoji and graphic pictorial means for communicating on the Internet. According to Swift Media, in 2015, there were a total of 2 billion smartphone users worldwide. On those devices, 6 billion emoticons or stickers were sent everyday via mobile messaging apps.[3] Yet the history of this form of visual communication dates back to the end of 20th century. The first iconic smiley face :) was born on November 9, 1989, which was considered to be the first appearance of emoticon in a text-dominant Internet world. The keyed visual representation of human emotions was realized by a certain combination of letters and punctuations in American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII). Easy to grasp and use, these digital expressions soon spread worldwide. In the late 1990s, Shigetaka Kurita created "emoji 絵文字," which was regulated by the Unicode Consortium so that they could be universally applied to mobile devices. Different from the original emoticons depicting human facial expressions, Kurita's emojis added more graphic figures like dog, cat, cake, heart, etc. It was not until the launch of IOS5 in 2012 that emoji officially stepped into people's digital mobile life. According to *Digiday*, in 2015, the total number of emoji characters had reached 722 images available in the standard Unicode 6.0 character set.[4] As more and more

[2] Calvin Cheng, "How Image Macros Work in the 2016 Chinese Meme War on Facebook Take the Virgin Atlantic Incident as an Example," *Calvin CHENG Yixiang*, last modified May 10, 2016, https://calvincheng1.wordpress.com/2016/05/10/how-image-macros-work-in-the-2016-chinese-meme-war-on-facebook-take-the-virgin-atlantic-incident-as-an-example/.
[3] Tanya Dua, "Emojis by the numbers: A Digiday data dump," *Digiday*, last modified May 7, 2015, http://digiday.com/marketing/digiday-guide-things-emoji/.
[4] Ibid.

people are exposed to this new medium of communication, emojis have also been taking root on major social network websites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. As Marta Dynel argues, "new media have induced societal changes and a bias favoring visual communication over verbal communication," owing to digital advantages of the Internet "by facilitating unrestricted circulation of overwhelming numbers of multimedia files." [5]

Tencent QQ (QQ), the most popular instant messaging software in the early 2000s, also launched its own emoticon gallery in 2003. Expressions in the QQ emoticon gallery was based on the yellow smiley face created by Harvey Ross Ball in 1963. The human face is represented by a yellow button, displaying various expressions and emotions such as scowling, grinning, frowning and clapping. Besides these, the QQ emoticon gallery also includes some basic graphic icons like a heart, coffee, and gift to enrich the conversation. According to *The Report of the Digital Expressions Usage by Chinese Netizens* released by Tencent in 2015, there was a total of over 500 hundred billion QQ emoticons that were sent and received in 2014, and there were 8 hundred billion QQ users, 90% of which have used QQ emoticons during online chatting.[6]

[5] Marta Dynel, "'I Has Seen Image Macros!' Advice Animal Memes as Visual-Verbal Jokes," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 660.
[6] "Research on Chinese Netizens' Usage of Emoticons," *Tencent ISUX*, last modified Apr. 20, 2015, https://isux.tencent.com/china-emoji-usage-report.html.

Figure 2. The Early Emoticon Gallery on QQ

The success of the QQ emoticon gallery marked the beginning of visual communication in China's instant messaging platforms. Yet it was the introduction of the rage comics that created the combination of images and captions in pictures to deliver the meaning that users want to express. Rage Comics are images to depict the unserious stories in the form of comics circulated online. These comics originally came from 4chan, an anonymous forum in the US. Rage comics are famous for their crude style of painting, their hilarious and light-hearted stories, and the coarse words that appear in the comic as well. When the Chinese Internet experienced censorship in the late 2000s, rage comics, together with other anti-censorship Internet slang and visual works, played as sharp weapons for netizens to claim a free public space without any manipulation and illusory harmony. Therefore, the image following the single-panel rage comic

style became the early form of Biaoqing Bao, and set the tone for Biaoqing Bao as a subversive symbol against any form of authority, regulation, and manipulation.

Biaoqing Bao appeared in public view and was immediately transmitted across the Chinese Internet as the number of global mobile users surged, and the technology of handy platforms advanced for the creation and circulation of Biaoqing Bao in the 2010s. The influx of Biaoqing Bao was accompanied by the popularization of image macros, a type of Internet meme overseas. Image macros take the form of "captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase,"[7] which can be seen in the corresponding Internet memes worldwide. One distinguishable feature of image macros is that "the text is usually in a bold Impact font with white letters and a black outline."[8] It is hard to tell if Biaoqing Bao was inspired by the notable style of image-text combination, though the development of Biaoqing Bao in China is destined to step into a different path from image macros. Ever since the successful circulation of Biaoqing Bao in the censored cyberspace, this new medium that served a disobedient purpose has become more and more popular in communication as a way to outlet feelings and emotions beyond words. While image macros still remained as the carrier of online inside jokes in the social network services, Biaoqing Bao has been regarded as the new replacement for emotions on social network platforms and has been incorporated into the WeChat Sticker gallery as a means of online communication and interaction.

In the WeChat sticker gallery, the layout of Biao Qing Bao mainly consists of the figure and a line of words in the picture. The caption is also attached under Biao Qing Bao, usually same as the words in the picture. Since Biao Qing Bao's function is to assist the communication

[7] "Definition of 'Image Macros'," *Know Your Meme*, last modified 2016, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros.
[8] Ibid.

process, the words appearing on Biao Qing Bao are more phatic and emotive ones than descriptive ones. Such juxtaposition of words and images just follows the style of single-panel rage comics. The incorporation of Biaoqing Bao into the largest instant messaging platform seemed to subdue the rebel spirit embodied in the original amusing and satirical form of Biaoqing Bao. After all, to advertise these visual works in the official gallery on the WeChat, a Biaoqing Bao creator cannot find a way to avoid censorship, if he or she keeps the curse words and vulgar images in Biaoqing Bao. Also, the official WeChat team emphasized the communicational functions of Biaoqing Bao, so that the subversive function of early Biaoqing Bao has almost faded away over the course. Yet the development of the new function on WeChat and Weibo enables users to add their custom Biaoqing Bao to conversations, posts and comments, which leaves space for individuals to freely represent their selves on the Internet, the Facebook campaign in January 2016 being one of the examples.

Therefore, transformed from the early anti-censorship weapon, Biaoqing Bao has now been recognized as an independent form of memes differentiated from other emoticons and stickers. Today's Biaoqing Bao can appear on the WeChat conversation, as well as Weibo posts or comments under them. Although the contexts in which Biaoqing Bao appears may vary from each other, the subversive symbol embodied in the sportive and hilarious form still remains the same. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that Biaoqing Bao, as one of the semiotic codes created and circulated on the Internet, is not only a visual entertainment in communication as a signifier of Chinese pop culture, but also a practice that represents a subversive symbol that strives against any forms of authoritative regulation and manipulation in the Chinese Internet culture. By collecting Biaoqing Bao from QQ emoticon gallery, WeChat Sticker (Biaoqing Bao) gallery and Biaoqing Bao circulated during the 2016 Facebook campaign, this thesis will discuss the

development of Biaoqing Bao from the early online image memes to the later emoticons and stickers used on Wechat as well as other social media. There are two significant moments in the timeline of Biaoqing Bao's development. The first one happened in 2009 when the Chinese government launched a campaign of "cleaning unhealthy online information." During this period, a large number of images appeared online for the first time to serve as a visual weapon to confront the censorship. The second one was in early 2016, after Taiwan presidential election was ended with the winning of the party that is less friendly to the mainland China, Chinese netizens launched a Biaoqing Bao war to occupy Tsai Ing-wen's FB account, commenting on her pages with Biaoqing Bao to express their unsatisfied and angry feelings. During this campaign, Biaoqing Bao that originally symbolized the anti-censorship discourse became the icon of the national identity, recognized by both participants in this campaign as well as mainstream media and other netizens who have witnessed the whole process.

In the first part, I will analyze the appearance of Biaoqing Bao from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "carnivalesque," appearing in *Rabelais and His World* in 1984,[9] to demonstrate that this new medium lets netizens have their voice again in a subversive and playful way under the government censorship of the Internet. In this sense, the Internet creates an alternative space that allows people to vent their feelings. When this alternative space got smashed and destroyed by the government censorship, Biaoqing Bao stepped into the Chinese netizens' life as a rebellious creation derived from the "feast" nature of human being. The "sensitive word" filter system behind the censorship gave space to people to play both verbal and visual puns. Therefore, Biaoqing Bao, the combination of the homophones of

[9] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 15.

sensitive words and images, became a new register of netizens to fight against the hegemonic censorship in China.

In the second part, I will discuss how Biaoqing Bao evolved from early anti-censorship memes evolved in tandem with emoticons and stickers, finally to become one of the brand new Internet memes discernible from other pictorial icons. Although the subversive spirit embodied in Biaoqing Bao seems to have been eliminated when Biaoqing Bao was incorporated into the official gallery on Wechat, the custom Biaoqing Bao added by users still left relatively free space to celebrate the online carnival by adopting the ugly form of Biaoqing Bao into their digital life. Also, by introducing "Dou tu" phenomenon, which is to combat with Biaoqing Bao during communication, and its history, I will argue that the spread of Biaoqing Bao not only represents netizens' sense of involvement in new technology, but also manifests a change of how people recognize and understand this new medium.

Finally, I am going to discuss how self-identities are visually presented at regional and national level by Biaoqing Bao. As W. Lance Bennet in *Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age* points out, today's netizens tend to locate themselves in different communities and define and manage their self-identities through being actively engaged in social and political communities.[10] In this part, I will argue that Biaoqing Bao helps users to actualize their collective identities by constructing the collective regional identities and visualize them in online communication. I will use the example of how Biaoqing Bao uses expressions in dialects as well as personified or materialized regional cultural elements to present regional identities online. Also, the example of the Facebook campaign also illustrates how Biaoqing Bao enables China's mainland netizens to

[10] W. Lance Bennett, "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age," in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth 2008,* ed. W. Lance Bennett (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 1–24.

circumvent the potential political disputes. Rather, it serves as a symbol for an all-encompassing national cultural identity.

2.0 THE DEBUT OF BIAOQING BAO

In 2008, one anonymous American Internet user posted a simple 4-panel comic strip on the image-based bulletin board, 4chan, which became the origin of the hit rage comic.[11] The comic was simply drawn with the Microsoft Painting software, and yet it vividly depicted the character's embarrassment and anger when he got a "splashback" in the toilet. The last panel with the zoomed-in angry face of the character, also known as "Rageguy," and "FU" immediately spread online. After various remodifications and recreations, a series of rage comics gained a great popularity in America. The simplicity in design and the dramatic effect these figures express made Internet memes of the same kind emerge one after another, such as "troll face," "LOL," "dude, come on," and "Y U not." Online meme generators also provide a convenient platform for netizens to retreat and spread new versions of these memes. It was such hilarious form of rage comics that played a key role in inspiring the appearance of Chinese Biaoqing Bao.

[11] "Definition of 'Rage Comics'," *Know Your Meme*, last modified Mar. 24, 2017, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics.

Figure 3. The first rage

2.1 A VISUAL WEAPON AGAINST GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP

Less than two years later, in January 2009, China's "Cleaning unhealthy online information"12 campaign brought to light the existing discontent among Chinese Internet users, which quickly culminated in a rebellious response that shares affinity with the emotions reflected in rage comics. More than a thousand websites have been forced to shut down, most of them containing politically inflammatory words and phrases, as well as nasty and offensive words and curses. The censorship mechanism depended on a filter system that could block out the "sensitive words" as designated by the government. The government did not publish any official documents to clarify what these sensitive words were, and consequently, such vague standards for the cleansing campaign gave Chinese netizens flexibility to create puns and images to replace any dangerous words that might get them in trouble with the censors. At first, netizens took advantage of

[12] Michael Wines, "A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors," *The New York Times*, last modified March 11, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html?_r=0.

homophones to circumvent the filter system. For example, the characters "草泥马 (grass-mud-horse)" were used to represent "Fuck your mother" due to their similar sound. "卧草 (Lying grass)" replaces "shit"; "法克鱿 (FaKe Squid)" replaces "Fuck You." "鹳狸猿 (stork-raccoon-ape)" refers to "network administrator." The original coarse language was thus, all transformed into various amusing objects and creatures, which not only feeds netizens' fascination with new Internet words, but also produces a sportive atmosphere when people use them. Meanwhile, due to the success of these hilarious and vivid replacements, the corresponding visual works also spread rapidly to reinforce their impressions on netizens. Both the verbal and visual puns represented a rebellious meaning against censorship. A large amount of Internet memes sprang out during this time, which became the predecessor of the later Biaoqing Bao.

One of the most famous anti-censorship memes created during this time was "Song of the Grass-mud-horse (草泥马之歌)."[13] It was this audio meme's appearance that brought the whole trend to create homophone-based anti-censorship puns and images to its climax. "Song of Grass-mud-horse" is based on a well-known children's song in China. With homophones, netizens wrote new lyrics for the song and uploaded it online.

"There is a herd of Grass-Mud Horses [Motherfuckers]

who live in the MaLe desert [MaLe Gebi, Your Mother's Cunt]

They are lively and intelligent

They are fun-loving and nimble

They live freely in the desert [MaLe Gebi, Your Mother's Cunt]

They are courageous, tenacious, and they have overcome the difficult environment

[13] "Song of the Grass-mud-horse 童声合唱《草泥马之歌》." Youtube Video, 1:23, posted by "ideacm," Feb. 4, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01RPek5uAJ4.

Oh, lying down Grass-Mud Horse [Oh, Motherfucker!]

Oh, running wild Grass-Mud Horse [Oh, Motherfucker!]

They defeated the River Crabs [Harmonism]

in order to protect their grassland [Free Speech]

River Crabs [Harmonism] disappeared from the MaLe desert forever!"[14]

Although the whole process of the video making and uploading went on anonymously, the song soon became a hit. The lyrics blended plenty of homophone memes into the song to make an analogy for netizens' fighting against the censorship. "Grass-mud-horse" and "MaLe Gebi [Desert]" function as modal particles "fuck your mother" and "damn," while "river crab" is a homophone for "harmony" in Chinese, in reference to the political slogan "build up a harmonious socialist society." This slogan was raised by President Hu Jintao. The government's "Report of The Seventeenth National Congress of the CPC" put forward scientific development and construction of a socialist society.[15] The slogan was repeated so many times ever since in the government official report and applied in so many domestic political issues, the "harmonious" cyber space included, that it began to symbolize the Party itself in China.[16] The government censorship in the name of "building up a harmonious society together" therefore arose from the netizens' consequent dispute and dissatisfaction.

The "song of grass-mud-horse" was recorded by a children's chorus. Children's pure and lovely voices make the "grass-mud-horse" figure, which represents hundreds of millions of netizens under censorship, sound more innocent, while the lyrical content of "river crab," or the

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[14] Li Nie, "The Phenomenon of 'Grass-Mud Horse' on Chinese Internet," *Li Nie's Weblog*, last modified Jul 13, 2009, https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/ln62-netspeak/author/ln62/.
[15] "The Seventeenth CPC National Congress," *People.cn*, last modified Aug. 2007, http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/134580/141428/.
[16] "Interpretation of the Seventeenth CPC National Congress," *People.cn*, last modified Aug. 24, 2007, http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/104019/105389/6424830.html.

"harmony" symbol seem more evil and intimidating. Yet, just like the refrain that describes how the grass-mud horse defeated "river crab" after "river crab" that attempted to invade their land, the netizens also circumvented the censorship to defend their right to speak online. In the video, the maker used the figure of alpacas to indicate the "grass-mud-horse." After it became popular on the Internet, netizens soon created alpaca images to give more people a visual reinforcement. Grass-mud-horse, thus, successfully served as an encouraging and rebellious metaphor in the fight against the hegemonic Internet censorship in China.

2.2 THE CARNIVALESQUE ONLINE

While Chinese netizens were busy creating their own Internet memes to "arm" themselves, some of them encountered rage comics on American websites, and began to share them with the Chinese audience.[17] The rough style of combining both amusing images and plain, and sometimes, vulgar words in rage comics, immediately received a lot of attention from Chinese netizens. They soon adopted the rage comics style to create Chinese versions, which were popularized through the website Chinese Rage Comics (暴走漫画).[18] Like the original rage comics, Chinese Rage Comics also allows users to share any embarrassing, hilarious and stupid experience in their daily life. However, Chinese netizens gave their main comic figure a very Chinese name— "Wang NiMa (王尼玛)". The first name NiMa is the homophone for the curse "fuck your mother" in Chinese, which is the same as the last two characters in "Grass-mud-horse

[17] "The Popularity of Rage Comics: New Generation's Anxiety and Hope," *XinhuaNet*, last modified May 2, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/tech/2012-05/02/c_123064468.htm.

[18] "Baozou Manhua 暴走漫画," *Baozou Manhua*, accessed Mar. 27, 2017, http://baozoumanhua.com.

(cao-ni-ma).” Anyone telling the story via rage comics embodied him or herself in this figure. For example, a netizen created the rage comics in Figure 4, describing a silly story about how NiMa feels so good about himself, only to realize he is overconfident.

Figure 4. The Chinese Rage Comics, with Wang NiMa as the main figure in the rage comic

Note that like this one, not all the stories in rage comics are about political issues as the “grass-mud-horse” video is. Chinese Rage comics draw sources from the most trivial things that everyone encounters but does not dare to share in public spaces. These things include how NiMa fails an exam and curses the teacher, how NiMa was embarrassed by his “bros”, how NiMa fails to chase the girls he likes, and so on. In each story, the creator always leaves one panel for NiMa to confess and let out his inner voice like “damn,” “fuck,” or “bitch,” etc. The rage comics enable everyone to vent his or her true feelings in the disguise of homophones and comic figures in the public space of the Internet. Therefore, although it is hard to prove if it is the birth of “grass-mud-horse” that inspired NiMa’s creation, Chinese rage comics definitely came into being at a time when censorship affected each person’s freedom to speak and netizens had to use puns and images to express what they were forbidden to say. The success of the rage comics inspired Chinese netizens to create more and more comics starring NiMa Wang, which became

the representation of a collective rebellious identity against the government's censorship. As the founder of the Chinese Rage Comics website said, the rage comic gives the grass roots of the society a spear and lets them vent and express personal feelings in a subversive way.[19] In this way, rage comics can be regarded as the carnivalesque in today's Chinese cyber space.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin discussed the carnivalesque as not only a particular cultural phenomenon but also a speech genre, through which folk humor is expressed in a nonofficial and liberating way. One of the key points he made about the carnival is, all of the "hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions"[20] were suspended during the carnival. In other words, while the official political and ecclesiastical life enables people to live stably and unchangingly, carnival and the carnivalesque refuse all of these lifestyles, as well as "the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions."[21] In Bakhtin's belief, human beings were born with the character of feast, or human nature to embrace liberation, and yet it was distorted under the medieval feudal system. Through carnival, people were allowed to enter the second life that lets them escape from the current world. To interpret today's Chinese Internet from Bakhtin's perspective, early online visual works represent a kind of carnivalesque that liberated Chinese netizens from a hegemonic authority, which attempts to exert its power and penetrate into every corner of the Internet.

The Internet censorship in China reflects a hegemonic control over discourses in media. According to a report about sensitive words summarized by QQ users,[22] the forbidden keywords blocked out by the filter can be divided into two groups. One includes insulting words like

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[19] "Say hello to creativity: an interview with the founder of rage comics in China," *Sina*, accessed Dec. 6, 2016, http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2012-03-03/081624051888.shtml.
[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 10.
[21] Ibid., 9.
[22] "The words you never see in Chinese cyberspace," *China Digital Times*, accessed Apr. 2, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/china0806/9.htm.

"bitch," "fuck" and "shit" in Chinese. Netizens tend to use them in curses and scabrous jokes. The other is politically inflammatory words, usually related to the ruling party and certain political events and figures, such as Tian'anmen (天安门), Falun Gong (法轮功), human rights (人权) and Mao (毛). Apart from these sensitive words, the Great Firewall also blocked the Chinese from foreign "illegitimate" webpages; the government also shut down more than 1900 websites and 250 blogs by mid-February, 2009, according to *The New York Times*.[23] However, the emergence of early Biaoqing Bao built up a gray area under online censorship, which became the cradle for many visual weapons to vent netizens' dissatisfaction against the censorship, "grass-mud-horse" being one of the examples.

Verbal puns and visual works provide a space for negotiations between the government and Chinese Internet users. The humor in Biaoqing Bao memes allowed everything prohibited to have its own voice again. As Bakhtin pointed out, "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators."[24] In this sense, people do not passively receive the message or enjoy the playful rebellion. The open platform of the Internet serves as a new channel for netizens to actively participate in the feast. One of the features on rage comics official websites is its meme generator. The generators simply consist of two essential elements— figure template and text. The early rage comics circulated online follows the multiple panels style. However, considering the efficiency to deliver the information, especially strong feelings, Chinese Rage Comics is gradually adopted a single panel, which became the predecessor of Biaoqing Bao.

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[23] Wines, "A Dirty Pun Tweaks China's Online Censors," http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/12/world/asia/12beast.html?_r=0.
[24] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 7-8.

2.2.1 Carnivalesque Speech in Biaoqing Bao

In Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, the marketplace serves as the language "reservoir"[25] for the carnival. Market is the place where people of various classes and backgrounds interact with each other, which lets different speech "excluded from official intercourse" freely circulate and spread. According to Bakhtin, one of the major manifestations of the carnivalesque culture is "various genres of billingsgate,"[26] which refers to abusing and offensive words. These obscene and insulting expressions become a manifestation for a playful feast to fight against the authority. In the carnival, the speech or the performance are immune from the set rules and beliefs, constructing a new social space, with features of defiance, equality, and liberty. Therefore, when the invisible hand of censorship attempted to close the door to the "cyber market," which was assumed to accommodate different voices and speech, it also infringed on netizens' right and spirit to embrace online carnival.

Although the Chinese government never released an official list of banned words, there were still several reports leaked from famous social media websites, pointing out the words and expressions that would be filtered out. As one of the documents from QQ shows, curse words account for a large portion of the banned vocabulary. This partly explains why images with the caption of curses dominate memes at that time. Taboo language exists in every culture. It is incorporated into and consists of social rules in a way that they stand at the opposite of norms. Timothy Jay said, because curse words are not supposed to speak, these words are, per se,

[25] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, 17.
[26] Ibid., 145.

"powerful."[27] The impetus behind cursing includes not only one's sense of humor, or the presentation of his or her identity, but also a power to utter curse words. Owing to the verbal and visual tricks, the forbidden taboo words online were brought to life again. The texts frequently used include "NiMa (尼玛)", "NiMei (尼妹)", "mud-grass-horse (草泥马)", "lying grass (卧草)", etc. Although they might look "clean" and "safe" for the filter system, these words sound insulting and offensive in reality. These prevailing Internet slangs reflect netizen's determination to break the social norms and rules prescribing on each person. Moreover, they use these words to manifest their anger and dissatisfaction against a hegemonic authority trying to manipulate their Internet lives.

Figure 5. The Rage Comic Embedded with "Ni Ma (Fuck You)!"

Another reason this taboo language became popular online lies in its transferred meanings. In other words, while homophones and images transformed these curses, they weakened the toxicity in these words. Just like Judith Irvine suggests, people tend to "create or model some distance between the problematic materials and the speaker who mention them" to

[27] Timothy Jay, *Why We Curse: A neuro-psycho-social theory of speech*, (Philadelphia, NL: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), 18.

"contain toxicity" in taboo words.28 Using homophones and mixing these homophones into the image are ideas netizens use to exert their power in the cyber space without being concerned about censorship. This strategy also alienates the speaker from the feelings that arise when directly speaking these words out. As more and more people have accepted the usage of memes containing curse words, the offensive and cursing meaning might be completely ignored and lost. For example, in rage comics, the last panel usually portrays the figure's inner voice to shout out "Fuck" or "Damn"; yet it just serves an exclamatory purpose.

2.2.2 Grotesque in Biaoqing Bao

Bakhtin also relates carnivalesque to "grotesque realism", which first appeared in his work *Rabelais and His World*. He sees the carnivalesque as a free space where the boundaries of hierarchies are erased. So is the human body depicted in the informal and rebellious atmosphere. The degradation of the human body is well manifested by the portrait of the human face in rage comics and later Biaoqing Bao transmitted in the social media. Take the example of the logo of Chinese Rage Comics. The logo portrays a close-up of a screaming face, with both eyes turning outward and mouth exaggeratedly wide open. The organs' position and proportion are presented in a hilarious way different to the normal face. As Andrew Robinson explains, "[grotesque] celebrates incompleteness, transgression and the disruption of expectations."[29] In this way, the rage comics creators degrade and portray the body in a "down-to-earth" way to materialize the sacred inner self. The passion to overturn all the traditional aesthetic rules in drawing and

[28] Judith T. Irvine, "Leaky registers and eight-hundred-pound gorillas," *Anthropological Quarterly 84*, no. 1 (2011): 15-40.
[29] Andrew Robinson, "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," *Ceasefire Magazine*, accessed December 6, 2016, https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/.

designing reflects a venting of dissatisfaction and depression as well as a call for new guideline to control the cyberspace.

Figure 6. A Grotesque Depiction of "NiMa" in theLlogo of the Chinese Rage Comics 暴走漫画

Figure 7. Another Example of Grotesque Depiction of Human Face in Rage Comics

The grotesque creation is not only limited to rage comics. Because of the convenient Photoshop and other image editing applications, Biaoqing Bao creators stepped out of the rage comics generator to search for more memetic content. The real person's face is one of the main resources for other creators of Biaoqing Bao. It is simply achieved by the cut-and-paste function in picture editing applications. These handy applications enable netizens to easily catch the dramatic facial expressions of any person by screenshot, and then process these images. The designer will edit a particular part of the figure in the image, usually the head or the private part, to cause a dramatic visual effect. For example, Fu Er Kang (福尔康) is a character from the costume drama *Return of the Pearl Princess* (还珠格格). The actor left a great impression on the audience with his sensational performance, especially with one scene when Fu Er Kang asks his lover to stay (figure 8). The fully devoted facial expression with the large nostrils of the actor makes the scene classic and unforgettable for audiences. Soon this character's Biaoqing Bao was uploaded online as in Figure 8. The facial features are photoshopped in an exaggerated way, with nostrils in the center position. Such grotesque way to present human body breaks the rules of traditional aesthetics. The magnification of nostrils, instead of eyes or mouth, also reminds audiences of the vulgar and filthy side of the human body, degrading it from the spiritual to the earthly.

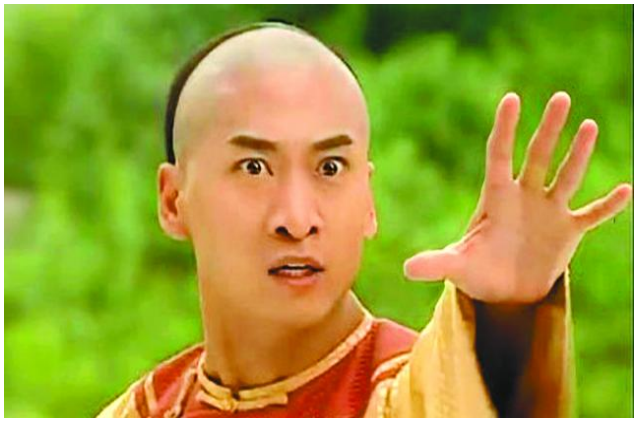

Figure 8. The Screenshot of Fu Er Kang 福尔康's most Classic Scene

Figure 9. The Photoshopped Screenshot Uploaded and Used as Biao Qing Bao

Celebrities' images offer abundant materials for Biaoqing Bao. Habermas in his model of the public sphere pointed out that the increasingly commercialized mass media makes the stars' one-dimensional persona in the public sphere.[30] The playful Biaoqing Bao makes them come down from an unreachable level. As more and more celebrity figures are used as the material for Biaoqing Bao, the netizens gained great satisfaction in recreating and manipulating the idol's body. The most famous Biaoqing Bao includes an image of Jackie Chan, Yao Ming, Zitao Huang. As shown in figure 9, Biaoqing Bao presents these celebrities in a reversed way from their appearance in other media. However, designers who make Biaoqing Bao out of the

[30] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT press, 1991), 162.

celebrity figures do not intend to besmirch them. The fans group are usually the most enthusiastic people to create their favorite star's Biaoqing Bao. The appearance of Biaoqing Bao demonstrates that the netizens transform any admiration or submission to authoritative rules to an entertaining consumption, and that the sacred entity is "not separated from the rest of the world."[31]

Figure 10. "Biaoqing Bao Three Tycoons" Elected by Chinese Netizens

[31] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

3.0 AN EVOLUTION TOWARDS COMMUNICATION

The Rage comics generator introduces netizens to the new medium of Biaoqing Bao, which was still called an emoticon or a sticker back in 2009. The user-friendly platform of the generator enables netizens without any designing or drawing skills to participate in the creative process. Anyone can create their own rage-comics-style stickers. Meanwhile, there were two essential factors that accelerated the proliferation of these stickers from the earlier expressive visual icons to the later, when they became formalized a major means of communicating more substantial information—the polarization of IM platform carried on smartphones and adaption of subjects from Chinese popular culture. With the development of instant messaging (IM) application carried on smartphones, like WeChat and Weibo, netizens had faster and more convenient access to social media. In the early stages, Biaoqing Bao drew materials from little stories people shared on the rage comics website, or crafted metaphoric satire of political incidents. Later, netizens began to adopt more up-to-date events and phenomenon into Biaoqing Bao, such as figures in the trendy TV drama *Empresses in the Palace* (甄嬛传), Jackie Chan in a shampoo commercial, and Chinese original cartoon figures. Biaoqing Bao blends a wide variety of social hot spots in it and spread in a playful and entertaining way that attracted attention from everyone.

While the social phenomenon promotes netizens' passion and interest to create the related Biaoqing Bao, Biaoqing Bao also visualized the phenomenon itself. For example, when Jackie Chan's shampoo commercial hit the Internet with its funny line "duang" (an onomatopoeia to

describe the movement of Chan's hair), Biaoqing Bao depicting Chan and his "duang" soon bombarded the Internet and spread on different social media in 2015. T-shirts and notebooks printed with these Biaoqing Bao even launched into online stores.[32] James Gleick once made an analogy of the spreading of memes to that of disease.[33] Biaoqing Bao's content is catchy; its form is magnetic; and its spread is infectious. All of these characteristics led to another boom of Biaoqing Bao as a reference to the Internet pop culture in China.

Figure 11. "Zhangcao Yantuanzi Biaoqing Bao 长草颜团子表情包" on the WeChat Sticker Gallery

However, until then, Biaoqing Bao had not been widely circulated as a major carrier of information. These Biaoqing Bao, or stickers, appeared on QQ, just to serve the illustrative

[32] "Duang Leads Hot Sale," *Haixia Net*, last modified Mar. 11, 2015, http://chuangye.hxnews.com/zxm/201503/11/586577.shtml.
[33] James Gleick, "What Defines a Meme," *Smithsonian Magazine*, last modified May 2011, Yixin Liang thesis final version.docx.

purpose among the text-dominant webpages, like Weibo, blogs, and other forums. It was not until WeChat version 6.1 developed a new function to let users add custom Biaoqing Bao to their sticker gallery that Biaoqing Bao began to step into people's instant messaging life. In the WeChat sticker gallery, the layout of Biaoqing Bao mainly consists of the figure and a line of words. The caption is also attached under Biaoqing Bao, usually with the same words in the picture. As shown in Figure 11, "Zhangcao Yantuanzi" Biaoqing Bao chooses the cute cartoon figure to perform daily expressions frequently used on WeChat, such as "Go Away," "Crying," and "Fighting," with the words arranged aside to convey the information in a vivid and direct way. To better function in communication, the words appearing on Biaoqing Bao are more phatic and emotive, rather than descriptive. Such juxtaposition of words and images follows the style of single-panel comics, like the early Rage Comics, in which there are both word in the image and a caption.

3.1 EARLY MEMES AND STICKERS ON THE CHINESE INTERNET

The word "meme" emerged in 1979 from *Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, who proposed the concept to indicate any information that passes from one's own brain to another's.[34] In the context of today's Internet culture, Dawkins would never have thought that his seemingly obscure idea of a meme could present itself in such a way as online "inside jokes."[35] Thus, Internet memes can refer to anything that is created by netizens and spread online like a virus. The emoticon is one of the earliest version of Internet memes. It is pictogram of a face, which is

[34] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 192.
[35] Patrick Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 120-134.

created by “putting certain character (e.g. letters, numbers, punctuation marks) on a regular computer keyboard in a certain order,”[36] to express certain feelings and emotions of the users. According to Linda K. Börzsei, emoticon is an experiment with new technology.[37] For example, it was the ASCII that gave birth to emoticon as an easy Internet meme that could be universally shared and used. The introduction of Photoshop in 1994 led to another great experiment of Internet memes. The first photoshopped image stood out in a time when the websites were mostly in the form of text. “Bert Is Evil," “All Your Base Are Belong To Us,” and “Tourist of Death” are all the work of visual humor based on the generative system of the Internet memes, thanks to the popularization of Photoshop.

Figure 12. Early QQ Stickers

[36] Linda Börzsei, “Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes,” *New Media Studies Magazine* 7, (2013): 1-25.
[37] Ibid.

Chinese emoticons' development also accompanied the development of technology. The development of pictorial icons used in QQ chat has experienced four stages: ASCII emoticons, system-provided emoticons, stickers and gifs, a type of animated images.[38] The emergence of custom stickers makes communication that was dominated by text and system-provided emoticons more fun and colorful. Different from emoticons conveying users' feelings by imitating facial expressions, custom stickers with captions are able to carry more specific and straightforward meanings in communication. As shown in Figure 12 (from left to right: "I'm wronged"; "laugh myself to death"; "you bad guy"; "nice to meet you"), early stickers spread on QQ are featured with the large font that visually contrasts sharply with the image on the side. Conspicuous captions caught users' eyes easily. The reason the early stickers were designed with discernible fonts is because the caption is the key element that delivers the message in online interaction. The image only serves as an auxiliary role to match the meaning and make the information have a better visual effect. For example, the stickers with weeping duck conveys the message that the speaker has a grievance, the same as the duck. The duck per se in the image has nothing to do with the speaker except its situation was a perfect portrait of grievance. In this sense, the interpretation of the early sticker was direct and caption-dominated.

3.2 WECHAT BIAOQING BAO (STICKER) GALLERY

As one of the most popular IM apps in China, WeChat becomes a perfect platform for people creating and spreading new Biaoqing Bao. The frequency of Biaoqing Bao transmitted per day

[38] Tang Qingxia, "Function and Limitation of QQ Emoticons in Online Chat QQ 表情符号在网络聊天中的表达功能及其局限性," *Jinri Nanguo* 88, no. 4 (2008): 154-156.

has reached more than a hundred million, according to the official design team on WeChat. In 2015, WeChat launched its official web platform to collect Biaoqing Bao from independent designers. The WeChat team also published an instruction manual online to help designers grasp the concept of Biaoqing Bao circulated on WeChat.[39] Also, this instruction manual serves as the handbook for researchers to study today's Biaoqing Bao, as a new media to deliver the message in communication. Just like the instructions say, Biaoqing Bao helps users to express feelings and emotions beyond the expression of words. Meanwhile, Biaoqing Bao also can ease the embarrassment or even the tension by its humor. Therefore, Biaoqing Bao, while largely applied to people's daily life on the Internet, have developed from an originally rebellious symbol to become essential media that adds fun and color to online communication.

Then, what elements make a Biaoqing Bao successful and popular? Patrick Davison proposed a framework to recognize and interpret Internet memes. In his framework, Internet memes consist of three essential elements: the *manifestation*, the *behavior*, and the *ideal*.[40] The manifestation of a meme refers to its "observable, external phenomena";[41] the behavior refers to the individual's action to create memes; and the ideal is the idea and concept conveyed by the meme. In the instruction, the WeChat team concludes the essential features of Biaoqing Bao according to their study on the usage experience and response from WeChat Biaoqing Bao users. The suggestions and principles in this instruction, to some extent, are layered in the way Davison analyzed Internet memes. The instruction "How to Create a Great Biao Qing (Bao)" provides design principles from three designing aspects: graphic design, conceptual design, and animation design. Graphic design and animation design dissect the components of a popular Biaoqing Bao

[39] "How to Create a Great Biao Qing (Bao)," *WeChat*, last modified Sep. 30, 2015, https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/readtemplate?t=bulletin/bulletin_6.
[40] Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes," 120-134.
[41] Ibid., 123.

from the features of how it is presented as well as how it is transmitted. In the view of Davison, presentation of Biaoqing Bao is the *manifestation* and the transmission is the *behavior*. Meanwhile, the conceptual design focuses on what a successful Biaoqing Bao should express, that is, the *ideal*. Based on Davison's multilayered framework and the instruction, researchers can distinguish and define Biaoqing Bao that are developed from the original emoticons and images circulated online.

The graphic design in the instruction manual suggests seven principles to meet functional needs as well as gain popularity among users. Some of the principles overlap with each other. Excluding the overlaps, there are four principles that the WeChat team encourages designers take into consideration: 1) amusing manifestation, 2) features that cater to the preference of user groups of different gender, ages, and styles, 3) identifiability and originality, which if possible, can resonate with users' experience while they use it, and 4) market concerns. Regarding the conceptual design of Biaoqing Bao, the instruction suggests designers avoid the seemingly attractive image or GIF without practical meaning. Since Biaoqing Bao function in the process of communication, when creating an idea behind Biaoqing Bao, designers might include elements from frequent words in daily conversation, expressions of intense emotions, trending Internet slang or specific terms customized for WeChat. For animated GIFs, the design advice suggests that Biaoqing Bao should be "exaggerated enough" to distinguish itself from a realistic depiction; the GIF should not be too long in duration; objects in the GIF should follow physical rules of reality, etc. This principle is not necessary for still images. Note that there are two extra principles which seem to violate the former rules. First, sometimes the animation might break the physical laws and leave a deep visual impression to users. Second, the animation does not necessarily have to be endowed with discursive meanings.

3.3 "DOU TU" CULTURE AND MESSAGE BEHIND BIAOQING BAO

As mentioned above, from early stickers on QQ to later Biaoqing Bao used on WeChat, the pictorial features have developed. However, the essential change does not lie in the semiotic form of Biaoqing Bao, but the way people recognize and perceive the code. McLuhan in his *Understanding Media* suggests, medium itself is the message.[42] People might have been accustomed with the medium as the carrier for information. The content is what people consider as the message. Yet McLuhan suggests that the medium delivers a kind of message that can introduce the new scale to the human life. In other words, the message in the medium shapes human action. From this perspective, Biaoqing Bao can be a perfect modern example of how the medium itself brought the change to the scale of human life compared with the content it carries.

The appearance of Biaoqing Bao changed Chinese netizens' inclination to regard early emoticons and stickers as only secondarily assisting or reinforcing the textual message. The iconic figure in Biaoqing Bao loses is auxiliary status and gradually becomes the primary expressive vehicle of communication. In this sense, it is not hard to discern an original sticker from Biaoqing Bao. As mentioned above, to interpret a sticker, the reader has to pay attention to the caption as well as the image, like the weeping duck in Figure 12. To change the duck figure into a weeping dog did not influence the meaning the user intend to express. Take another example, a sender who uses the sticker "toast for friendship" might merely want to appreciate his or her relationship with the sticker receiver. However, when reading this sticker from Biaoqing Bao's perspective, the user would first be impressed by the layout—the font is catchy in a way that is discordantly split into two sides. In Figure 13, the woman making the formal toasting

[42] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 9.

gesture is also dressed out of fashion. Plus, the toast is a word rarely seen in the online context. The new interpretation might indicate this Biao Qing Bao is a sarcasm of the relationship between the sender and the receiver.

Figure 13. "Toast for Our Friendship" Biaoqing Bao

Another phenomenal change Biaoqing Bao bought is "Dou tu (斗图)." "Dou tu" literally means "duel by image" in Chinese. It refers to the situation when people use Biaoqing Bao to respond to each other and whoever makes it to the last wins the duel. As described by Ma, "the common way to provoke a sticker duel is by throwing one or two stickers into the midst of a conversation. If your friend responds with the same, then fire at will."[43] Here, "tu (image)" refers to Biaoqing Bao. The etymology of this word was not documented. However, the early form of this kind of combat can be traced back to users' sharing emoticons or stickers on QQ, which was the dominant place for the circulation and collection of emoticons or stickers before Wechat appeared. As more and more Chinese netizens were exposed to the new IM software, the storage of a certain amount of stickers indicated the user's familiarity and proficiency with the technology. Netizens used to share interesting stickers with each other to enrich their sticker

[43] Ma April. "Dou Tu, The Art of Sticker War," *TechNode*, last modified Oct. 17, 2016, http://technode.com/2016/10/17/dou-tu-art-sticker-wars/.

gallery. Such mutual action gradually developed into a type of dialogue to exhibit one's collection of stickers and emoticons. Therefore, the prototype of "Dou tu" was born out of netizens' incentive to show off or purely share the fun stuff online.

The rage comics generators and other image-editing software accelerate the process of the development of the image duel. They enable netizens to pick up materials that are part of daily life easily and make them into Biaoqing Bao. In most cases, users just have to replace the caption and a new Biaoqing Bao comes into being. The development of the "Dou tu app" also caters to the needs of millions of warriors on the battlefield, giving them a user-friendly way to make their own weapon. It indicates that Biaoqing Bao has stepped into a time of mass production and starts its own industry now.

3.4 THE UGLY STYLE OF BIAOQING BAO

Even though the message behind Biaoqing Bao has changed from early rage comics and other anti-censorship memes, today's Biaoqing Bao still keeps the influence under its predecessors in both image and texts. The rough painting style is one of the significant features of Biaoqing Bao, which is congruent with that of rage comics. The first rage comics in 4chan were drawn with the Windows painting software. The painting style sharply contrasts with the detailed attractive comic works and defies the dominant aesthetics. Nick Douglas named such style as Internet Ugly, which include freehand mouse drawing as well as poor grammar and spelling.[44] He

[44] Nick Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," *Journal of Visual culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 314-339.

believes it is the Internet Ugly that defines "the core aesthetic of memetic Internet content."[45] One of the reasons for the formation of the Internet Ugly aesthetic is the Internet's lack of a gatekeeper, which also was what attracted so many netizens, amateurs or experts, into the creation and circulation of these memes.

Figure 14. Examples of Ugly-Style Biaoqing Bao

In rage comics, the embarrassing story portrayed in the comic looks more hilarious and silly due to its crude and unpolished drawing style. Thereafter, such an ugly and crude style has been kept the same in the subsequent creation of new Chinese Biaoqing Bao. Like Figure 14 shows, figures in Biaoqing Bao might vary from each other, yet they all adopt the genre of line-drawing. To effectively convey the iconic message, the designer of Biaoqing Bao will simplify the less important part, like the head and torso, which are replaced by the circle. Other parts that

[45] Ibid., 315.

need to be illustrated in detail include facial expressions, hand gestures, and props. These elements, although crudely drawn, too, catch users' eyes easily, compared with other highly iconized parts, and thus, they can present dramatized feelings behind the images.

The ugly rough style of Biaoqing Bao's attraction for so many people also lies in the fact that from the abstraction of figures arises a sense of individual involvement with the image. McLuhan's Understanding Media raised the idea that "all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems."[46] As mentioned above, when people read cartoons or observe other visual works, they tend to project themselves in them. Based on that, McLuhan further introduced two different types of media—hot medium and cool medium. He said, while hot medium is filled with "high definition," requiring less sense of participation, cool medium is "low definition" and needs more interaction with the audience to achieve completeness.[47] Whether it is the stick figure in original rage comics, or a human face composed by two dots and three lines, like the first image in figure, they all represent an extreme abstraction of the human figure. Without more details to depict the figure's physical or clothing features, the reader has to use more imagination to complete the meaning of these works. During this process, it is easier to project the self into the rage comic or Biaoqing Bao. Moreover, when the caption fits the user's feeling, a particular Biaoqing Bao can just become a presentation of self online.

[46] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 3.
[47] Ibid. 22.

4.0 THE PRESENTATION OF SELF THROUGH BIAOQING BAO

Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* uses the dramaturgical metaphor for people's daily practices in society. He compares the individual's presentation of self to the performance on the stage under a frame constructed by personal experience. He believes it is such a frame acquired from and applied to social interactions that establishes their rules and guides people to perform themselves. According to Goffman, what happens on the stage does not operate under an objective rule. In another word, the frame is constructed by a consensus of subjective conceptions and interpretation of any social conventions and norms. An individual not only perceives and understands other's behaviors and practice according to the frame, but also uses it to present him or herself. According to Goffman, there are various "carriers or sign-vehicles"[48] that convey the information to help individuals properly act and interact in the way they are expected regarding appearance, clothes and other tangible or sensible carriers. Meanwhile, there is also hidden information that is revealed inadvertently from the interaction such as the true feelings and attitudes behind the act of oneself. Both types of symbols aim to help individuals situate themselves in social interactions and direct them how to act "in order to call forth a desired response."[49]

[48] Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 1.
[49] Ibid.

When encountered with people of various types, individuals will present themselves in different ways to be accommodated in situations or settings. In this sense, all of the participants reach a "working consensus" so that the performance can effectively proceed. Goffman also distinguishes between "front stage" and "back stage." While the former is opened publicly for spectators to watch, the latter provides the private space for performers to prepare and conduct activities that are not intended to be shown. A significant rule separating these two spheres is the frame of the performance, not only prescribed to the situation, but also to the performer. Besides, one of the essential strategies used in performance Goffman has mentioned is the impression management. Goffman suggests 'Selves' are presented and developed through the interactions with others. Since defining oneself becomes a reflexive process, a person tends to use techniques to "evoke from them [others] a specific response he is concerned to obtain."[50]

Goffman presents a dramaturgical way to decode interactions among individuals, yet he focuses more on the face-to-face communication, than interactions via new technology or media. Goffman himself once included the telephone and mail, but as a "reduced version" of social interactions because of lack of the physical presence of the response during the communication.[51] Yet Goffman's idea of "gender display" in his 1979 book, *Gender Advertisements*, confirmed communication beyond physically limited space also follows a certain type of frame that instructs such remote interaction.[52] He uses the example of the interaction via a new medium, the advertisement, and states that the advertisement "establish[es] the terms of contact, the mode or style or formula for the dealings that are to ensue between the

[50] Ibid., 3.
[51] Erving Goffman, "The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 1-17.
[52] Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 1.

persons providing the display and the persons perceiving it."[53] It "ha[s] a dialogical character of a statement-reply kind."[54] Dan Laughey suggests that such application of Goffman should be limited to "ads or other media that represent human figures in realist (i.e. real-like) situations."[55] Apart from highlighting these more media-friendly situations for self-presentation, Laughey also sees the applicability of Goffman's "front and back stage" regions to media. For example, newsreaders or radio DJs presents themselves with a pleasing personality in order to accommodate the variety of their audiences. To do so, the performers have to conceal any qualities or behaviors that violate the expected personality. Laughey believes such interaction is not solely produced by stimulus-response of media stereotyping, but is based on a consensus on social rituals presented in a mediated way.[56] In this sense, media imitates the social rituals happening in face-to-face communication. Other scholars have applied Goffman's dramaturgical theory to the virtual space of the Internet. Hugh Miller points out that as new etiquettes for presenting oneself through developing technologies rapidly spread out, these media must have led to changes in the traditional range of frames applied face-to-face communication. He believes we need to develop a full understanding of the new "frame," in which people will more effectively process their interactions online.[57] By analyzing the personal homepage, Miller found the difference between face-to-face communications and communication on the Web was less considerable than Goffman assumed. While the interaction on the early web is limited in a way that there is less context on the web so that people cannot "frame the interaction properly," a

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Dan Laughey, *Key Themes in Media Theory* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2007): 83.
[56] Ibid., 27.
[57] Hugh Miller, "The presentation of self in electronic life: Goffman on the Internet," (presentation, Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space Conference, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, June 1995).

webpage still "provides a locus for electronic self."[58] In Liam Bullingham and Ana Vasconcelos' research on blogs, they argue that bloggers created and present their online identities by imitating their offline self and publishing their offline "voicing." Therefore, the implicit information and the symbols can also present an "electronic/online self" based on the practice individuals use the medium, by which they reveal key information to help others anchor each other in the interaction.[59]

As a new, trending code circulating among electronic devices, Biaoqing Bao has become one of the "sign-carriers" that presents the electronic self of its users. By studying QQ emoticons, one of Biaoqing Bao's predecessors, as well as emoticons used in other social media, researchers have demonstrated the correlation between usage of the new medium on the Internet and the presentation of self, identities, including social and cultural identity, and psychologies and inner emotions. For example, Park et al., by investigating the emoticon's usage on Twitter by various nationalities, suggest that the emoticon reveals "social-cultural norms."[60] The claim is confirmed by Zhu, Yuki and Jack's research.[61] Apart from this, usage of emoji also shows gender disparity, which can be reflected in the frequency and variety of emoji usage.[62] Lu Xiaoyan and Yao Jinyun have examined the relationship between emoticons and verbal cues in

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[58] Ibid.
[59] Liam Bullingham and Ana C. Vasconcelos, "'The presentation of self in the online world': Goffman and the study of online identities," *Journal of Information Science* 39, no. 1 (2013): 101-112.
[60] J. Park, V. Barash, C. Fink, and M. Cha, "Emoticon style: Interpreting differences in emoticons across cultures," "Emoticon style: Interpreting differences in emoticons across cultures," paper presented at the International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM), Ann Arbor, MI, Jun. 28, 2013.
[61] Zhu X., "A Symbolism Study of Expression in Text-based Communication," PhD Diss., Iowa State University, 2015; R. E. Jack et al., "Facial Expressions of Emotion are not Culturally Universal," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 19 (2012): 7241-7244; Yuki M., W. W. Maddux and T. Masuda, "Are the Windows to the Soul the Same in the East and West?: Cultural Differences in Using the Eyes and Mouth as Cues to Recognize Emotions in Japan and the United States," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2007): 303–311.
[62] Chad C. Tossell et al., "A longitudinal study of Emoticon Use in Text Messaging from Smartphones," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 2 (2012): 659-663.

I.M. communication. The quantitative research on QQ indicates a correlation between particular emoticons used to express strong feelings (like grief) and verbal cues to invoke specific topics.[63]

4.1 PRESENTATION OF REGIONAL IDENTITY

In August 2015, the official Wechat Biaoqing Bao website held an online activity to solicit Chinese dialect themed Biaoqing Bao. The slogan was "some words can only be said in dialect; some feelings, can only be expressed by dialect; and some punchlines, can only be understood in dialect."[64] In October, designers created various dialect themed Biaoqing Bao that represented dialects from almost every province in China. These Biaoqing Bao were soon released on Wechat and immediately grew popular across different regional communities. The dialect series encapsulate the most common regional symbols, not only including verbal expressions, but also visual impressions. As guided in Wechat instruction for Biaoqing Bao designers, each series of Biaoqing Bao should be based on either the most commonly used or the most representative words in the dialect. Besides, the main figures depicted in Biaoqing Bao also serve an important role in adding regional flavor to Biaoqing Bao. Therefore, those regional Biaoqing Bao depicts the local life and makes users comfortable when using these dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao. One designer of Biaoqing Bao said in an interview, local people after seeing their dialect-themed

[63] Lu Xiaoyan and Yao Jinyu, "The Function and Relationship of Verbal and Nonverbal Cues in IM Interpersonal Communication," in *Recent Progress in Data Engineering and Internet Technology*, ed. Ford Lumban Gaol (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 35.
[64] "Soliciting Dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao," *WeChat*, last modified Aug. 31, 2015, https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/readtemplate?t=bulletin/bulletin_4.

Biaoqing Bao appreciated her efforts to enable "their own regional voice" in such a creative and trendy way.[65]

4.1.1 Personification and Materialization of Local Cultural Elements

Regarding the identification of self in network society, W. Lance Bennet once suggested that "individuals may belong to many loosely tied associational chains that connect them to their social and occupational worlds."[66] Based on Fishman's idea of cultural identity, Ennaji argues that culture is "what basically characterizes a society as an identifiable community". He believes while language is part of the cultural components, it also serves as an important vehicle of culture.[67] Thus, regional language, that is, dialect, plays a key role in defining a cultural community. When Wechat released the dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao, the presence of dialects and cultural symbols signified the shared cultural identity among the users.

In the Beijing Dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao,[68] local cultural elements are embedded in two figures: Miss Rabbit and Woola Bear. The introduction to this Biaoqing Bao was written with the remarkable dialect features, "Who knows the best about Beijing Dialect. It must be this couple of two young masters, who were locally born and raised in the Hutong of Si Jiu City (a local reference to Beijing)". The designer refers these two figures, the rabbit and bear, as "Jing Pian Zi", meaning indigenous Beijinger in the Beijing dialect. In the following Biaoqing Bao composed of 24 images with words in them, a series of common expressions in Beijing dialect is

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[65] "The best Changsha dialect themed Biaoqing Bao on Wechat now," *Xiaoxiang Morning Newspaper*, accessed Apr. 9, 2016, http://www.xxcb.cn/event/2015/9022453.html.
[66] W. Lance Bennett, *Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age*, 13.
[67] Moha Ennaji, *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco* (New York: Springer, 2005), 24.
[68] "Wechat Dialect themed Biaoqing Bao Compilation," *Wechat*, accessed Apr. 9, 2016, https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/readtemplate?t=wap/active/sticker_index.

performed by these figures. For example, “Chi Le Me Nin Nei? (Have you eaten? or How are you?)” is presented by Miss Rabbit who is picking her teeth, with another hand patting on her bloated tummy, which indicates she just finished a satisfying meal. “Have you eaten?” as a representative way for Beijinger to greet each other, is not necessarily used after a meal though. Yet this Biaoqing Bao reconstructs the original context according to its literal meaning, from which the expression has evolved into a major way to say hello. Meanwhile, the Biaoqing Bao image represents people’s daily life in Beijing, as users can tell from Miss Rabbit’s relaxed gesture and contented but witty facial expression. By exaggerating the features in the figure of Biaoqing Bao, the designer gives users a sense of what an authentic conversation between Beijingers should be. When an outsider uses these Biaoqing Bao, he or she can easily imagine the authentic Beijing favor, that is, the way a Beijinger communicate and the city’s culture, with Biaoqing Bao messages on WeChat.

Figure 15. Beijing Dialect-Themed Biaoqing Bao, with two main characters: Miss Rabbit and Woola Bear

In visualizing a regional character, designers of Biaoqing Bao also incarnate local elements into Biaoqing Bao. As shown in the Beijing dialect themed Biaoqing Bao, the headwear of the two figures are designed specifically to reflect the significant cultural symbols of China—the panda and the national flag's theme colors. Choosing the most typical part of Chinese culture to portray Beijing dialect Biaoqing Bao demonstrates the crucial role Beijing plays as China's political and cultural center. In the introduction of this Biaoqing Bao, a classical setting in the teahouse also draws people's attention to a traditional communal place in Old Beijing City. The presence of cattail leaf fan, myna bird and abacus all call on the users' recognition of local culture, thus constructing a shared regional identity based on these familiar elements.

Another way of embodying a local cultural element is through the creation of a symbolic figure. In the Zhongshan dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao, the main figure is called "Uncle Sun". The creation of this cartoon figure was inspired by Sun Yat-sun ("Sun Zhongshan" in Mandarin), a political pioneer in modern Chinese history, after whom Zhongshan city is named. In a newspaper interview, Liu Junjie, the designer, talked about the story of "Uncle Sun", the imaginary figure of a warmhearted old man.[69] Borrowing the characteristics of the great "Father of the Nation" such as the hairstyle, mustache and his Chinese tunic suit, Liu intended to create a character that can be recognized by Zhongshan people and be a "spokesman for local culture". The series of Biaoqing Bao was named "Uncle Sun teaches you how to speak Zhongshanese". Liu said, "in my mind, Uncle Sun is just a senior living around. He is fond of local culture. Perhaps, through the circulation of this figure, more and more young people will be attracted by Zhongshanese culture and Mr. Sun Yat-sun."[70]

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[69] "Promoting the local culture by drawing 'Uncle Sun'," *Zhongshan News*, accessed Apr. 9, 2016, http://www.zsnews.cn/news/2016/03/11/2845410.shtml.
[70] Ibid.

4.1.2 Complement between Image and Words in Biaoqing Bao

While the promotion of a shared cultural elements or characteristics help to build up a regional collective identity, it also puts such an identity at risk of becoming a geographical stereotype, especially when one regional characteristics cannot fit into the other regional context. Dialects, rendered as others by mainstream language, always associate with stereotypes. Zhang Kai claims that the process of representation of Others originated from the recognition of differences. Each group involved identifies itself by categorization and classification through the continuous efforts to underline its discrepancies with others. In the process of labeling differences, there formed the various stereotypes against Others.[71] Chinese dialect speakers tend to be associated with a regional stereotype because of great variation from Mandarin Chinese. Sometimes, these stereotypes even stigmatize the dialect speakers and their regional characteristics.

The format of Biaoqing Bao gives dialect speakers a chance to erase any stereotype based upon the dialect's variation from Mandarin. With each expression being illustrated, phonetic and semantic misunderstandings are rectified. Thus, the complement between image and words in Biaoqing Bao contribute to erase the stereotype against the local and represent the collective, regional identity in an appropriate way.

Designer Xiao P. created Changsha dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao with 24 stickers in it.[72] Changsha dialect is a representative one in Xiang dialect, one of the seven major dialect branches in China. When represented by Chinese characters, Changsha dialect has its unique morphological traits quite different from the standard written Chinese. According to Xiao P, this

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[71] Zhang Kai, *Fundamentals of Media Literacy* 媒介素养概论 (Beijing: Zhongguo Chuan Bo Da Xue Chu Ban She, 2006), 99.
[72] "Wechat Dialect themed Biaoqing Bao Compilation," *Wechat*, accessed Apr. 9, 2016, https://sticker.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/mmemoticon-bin/readtemplate?t=wap/active/sticker_index

is native of Changsha, Changsha dialect might look too derogatory if judged by its literal meaning. For example, when complimenting one another, people from outside the region use the standard “Zhen Bang”, in which “Bang” means great. In Changsha dialect, however, “Diao La”, “Gao De La” and “Niao Sai La” are used to compliment people. Yet in written form, none of these characters indicates a positive meaning. The character “Niao" even associate with the meaning of teasing.[73] Thus the literal form of Changsha dialect would look rude to outsiders and leave readers from other regions with an impression that “the speakers are going to fight each other as the conversation proceeds”. However, the appearance of Biaoqing Bao figure created by Xiao P. called “Mange,” with his dramatic and hilarious performance of each oral expression erases the tension caused by the seemingly rude written form. Xiao P purposely designed his Mange’s figure as a chubby one, in order to leave a cute and friendly impression. Mange’s mischievous gestures also demonstrate his non-offensive intention to interact with people.

[73] “The best Changsha dialect themed Biaoqing Bao on Wechat now,” http://www.xxcb.cn/event/2015/9022453.html.

Figure 16. Changsha Dialect-Themed Biaoqing Bao with the Chubby “Mange”

Northeast dialect is another dialect that has a rustic and coarse sound. In Wechat’s Northeast-dialect Biaoqing Bao series, expressions such as “Ge Sha Ya (what’s up)”, “Zhao Xiao Ne (How dare you)” and “Gun Du Zi (get out)” are regarded as the most representative words to reflect the regional characteristics of straightforwardness and open-mindedness. However, at the same time they tend to reinforce negative stereotypes against Northeastern people. The designer of the Northeast dialect-themed Biaoqing Bao also utilizes a couple of lovely chubby figures, members of Taozi's family, to perform the daily conversations. For example, in figure 17, “Gun Du Zi (get out)”, which is usually seen as an unfriendly way to respond others, is displayed in this picture by Taozi’ mother. By setting the background within the Taozi's family’s daily interactions, the designer makes their chatty and wordy talk appear to be natural and understandable, even for people from the rest of China. In this way, usage of the dialect Biaoqing Bao erases stereotypical regional impression to a large extent.

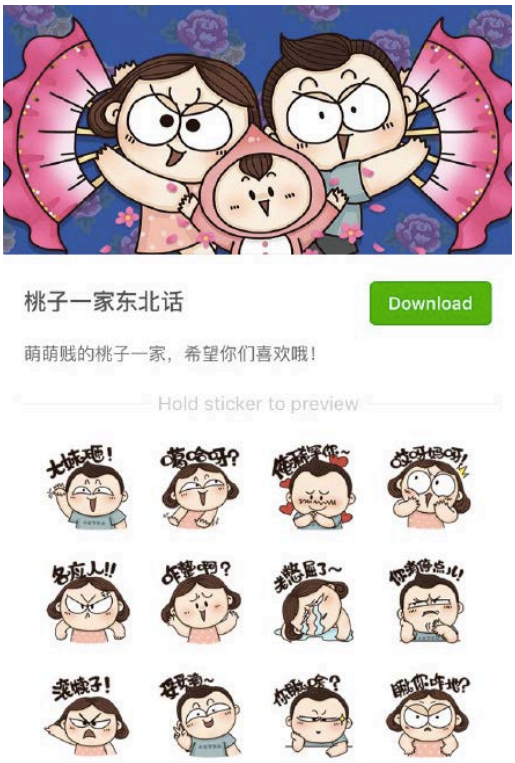

Figure 17. The Taozi's Family Biaoqing Bao

4.2 THE FACEBOOK CAMPAIGN

While Biaoqing Bao is gradually accepted by more and more users, as an easy and interesting communication tool, the 2016 Taiwan election dispute ultimately upgraded Biaoqing Bao to a sharp weapon. Mainlanders' angry feelings keeps simmering against Tsai Ing-wen's winning and her support to Zyuyu Chou, the girl who upheld the Taiwan flag, indicating her opposition against unification of China. However, the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (TAO) never gave a direct official response regarding the incident, which seems to be indifferent, compared with the mainland netizens' dissatisfied discourse circulated online before and after the election. When the mainland netizens cannot appeal to the political resolution in reality,

cyberspace again offered an alternative way for them to vent. The reason netizens chose Biaoqing Bao as the weapon to throw into the Facebook battlefield lies that such a communication tool allows users to project their selves into it, as mentioned above. The targeted Biaoqing Bao against “independence of Taiwan” represents a unified national identity, which directly participated into and confronted with the political dispute. Such a national identity broke the regional boundaries within the mainland China. The entertaining form of Biaoqing Bao, however, indicated that the nature of this political dispute was differentiated with the official reaction and attitude of the TAO and other authoritative organizations of the government, which would hardly represent the angry mass and give expression to their true emotions. Biaoqing Bao, again, play a subversive role in cyberspace and construct a national identity to fight against “any forms of independence.”

4.2.1 Biaoqing Bao Used in the Facebook Campaign

Figure 18. Confucius Biaoqing Bao

Biaoqing Bao used by mainland netizens in this campaign generally consisted of two types. The first type is Biaoqing Bao with a canter figure. For example, Biaoqing Bao shown in Figure 18 uses the figure of Confucius photoshopped to have a contemptuous look, saying, “An Old Master

like me has never seen a poser like you." "Poser" here is a popular Internet slang used to express the users' contempt against anyone pretends to be great in a false way. Therefore, the figure shows a sense of priority and at the same time, a feeling of disdain for any Taiwanese who advocates for independence. There is also another form of Biaoqing Bao that depicts gorgeous scenery in China or delicious Chinese food. These are attached to a line of caption saying "I would like to invite you to (the names of the local famous attractions like the Great Wall)!" or "I would like to invite you to eat (the names of a certain local representative food, for example, hot-and-dry noodles, a Wuhan specialty)!" Instead of emotionally and angrily arguing about who owns the island, the mainlander netizens believe "cultural communication" such as inviting the Taiwanese to enjoy local foods and scenery would help the Taiwanese have a better understanding of the mainland, so that tensions across the strait could be eased.

After the mainland netizens bombarded Facebook in such a dramatic and hilarious way to respond to the political incidents, Taiwanese netizens were blown away by Biaoqing Bao and began to appropriate and mimic the same form of image to fight back. Soon, the discourse about how Biaoqing Bao was dispersed across the Taiwan Straits became a hot topic in mainland social media. Taiwanese netizens' copying Biaoqing Bao also let mainland netizens began to print "Biaoqing Bao exclusively designed for PRC" on their visual weapons. Thus, the informal Biaoqing Bao originally created from all sorts of materials began to stand for a mainland netizens' identity.

4.2.2 A National Identity in Public Space

Yang Guobin analyzes the Facebook Campaign as the Chinese netizens' "self-performance."[74] The expedition over the Great Firewall enabled the participants to imagine a "collective heroism" in a "disenchanted era of commercialization and individualization."[75] By scrutinizing the different layers of identification of netizens, W. Lance Bennet found that individuals become more engaged in the management of their social identities through online presentation. He states that

> Contemporary young people enjoy unprecedented levels of freedom to define and manage their self-identities in contrast with earlier generations' experiences with stronger groups (denominational church, labor, class, party) that essentially assigned broad social identities to their members.[76]

Therefore, such generational change regarding the defining of self-identity is projected through "highly personalized political preferences."[77] By actualizing such political appeal, individual find a way to define and manage their online identity.

Habermas provides "a historical-sociological account of the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere."78 Compared with the private sphere, the public sphere is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state."79 Through interaction in the public sphere, like assembly,

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[74] Yang Guobin, "Heroic Fans of Nationalism," *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication* 38, no. 11 (2016), 25.
[75] Ibid., 25.
[76] W. Lance Bennett, *Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age*, 13.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Jürgen Habermas, Introduction to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, ed. Thomas McCarthy, (Cambridge: MIT press, 1991), xi.
[79] Ibid., 176.

among private people who come from their private realm, there emerges various opinions and ideas concerning the common interests in the state. In this sense, the whole event of Chinese netizens flooding into and commenting on Facebook pages, can be seen as their engagement with international political issues in the public sphere. Before this 2016 Facebook Campaign, Biaoqing Bao, like emojis, were closely related to personal identity, which was reflected through the variety and frequency of the Biaoqing Bao's usage. Yet the public Facebook campaign ultimately transformed Biaoqing Bao into a tool for manifesting a national collective identity instead of a personal one.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It took nearly half a century from the first emergence of the smiley face emoticon in 1989 to wide application of emojis on mobile devices in the 2000s; it took almost twenty years from the first couple of photoshopped Internet meme's appearance in the 1990s to the popularization of image macros in the late 2000s; and it took a decade for Biaoqing Bao to evolve from the early iconic QQ emoticons around 2003 and scattered Internet memes in 2008, to a brand new medium that encapsulate today's Chinese pop culture. Not only did the digital technology experience an exponential development, but also the creation of new visual communication tools. Such transformation is based on the technology advance, and it also represents the change of Internet interaction from a text-dominant form to the combination of visual and verbal symbols. All of the development redefines the online communication and graphic images. Just as Dawkins admits decades after he first raised the idea of memes, "instead of mutating by random chance before spreading by the form of Darwinian selection, Internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity in the hijack version."[80]

Instead of being hijacked by the creativity of netizens, the birth of Biaoqing Bao was rather a production of the subversive spirit of Chinese netizens, who spare no efforts to embrace and celebrate their liberating feast in the cyber space. The success of such visual weapons to

[80] Richard Dawkins, "Just for Hits," (presentation in the Saatchi & Saatchi New Directors' Showcase in Cannes Festival, Cannes, France, Jun. 20, 2013).

confront censorship also accelerated its spread across various social network platforms. Biaoqing Bao thus became one of the major communication means online. Even the official promotion by WeChat and Weibo does not totally depress the rebellious meaning behind Biaoqing Bao. As more and more custom Biaoqing Bao appeared during Dou tu and in other contexts, the creativity driven by the idea of anti-authority and regulation will live on.

Due to Biaoqing Bao's hilarious and sportive forms and content, previous studies hardly take it as the serious object of online communication research. Yet with the wider application of instant messaging tool on mobile devices, Biaoqing Bao is receiving greater popularity owing to its offering the right for users from various regions, age groups, genders and classes to have their voice heard and dispersed. I hope this research will give an insight for the further studies of Biaoqing Bao, not only as a brand new form of the medium, but also a unique cultural phenomenon under the Chinese Internet context.

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